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Evan T. Jones, 'Preface' in Stuart Jenks, ROBERT STURMY'S COMMERCIAL EXPEDITION TO THE MEDITERRANEAN (1457/8) *With Editions of the Trial of the Genoese before King and Council and of other sources* (Bristol Record Society Publications, Vol. 58, 2006)

When one thinks of the English maritime expeditions of the fifteenth century, there is a tendency to think first, perhaps indeed solely, of John Cabot's 1497 expedition to North America. Long portrayed as the first step in the creation of Britain's maritime empire, Cabot's 1497 expedition is justly famous – in Britain, in Canada and particularly in Bristol. Such indeed is Cabot's fame in his adopted city that it is difficult to go far in Bristol without being reminded of him. One statue of John Cabot stands at the entrance to the Council House and another stares pensively over the entrance to the medieval harbour. A reconstruction of his ship, the *Matthew*, is berthed a few hundred metres down from the old harbour and she, in turn, is overlooked by Cabot Tower on Brandon Hill. Moreover, since Cabot's name is used by dozens of institutions and businesses across Bristol, from Cabot School, to Cabot Studios, to Cabot Properties, it is hard to go far in the city without being reminded of his legacy.

Robert Sturmy, by contrast, is an individual of little fame, even in his home town. Operating forty years before Cabot, his commercial expedition to the Eastern Mediterranean is little known and less remembered – no streets are named after Sturmy and no memorials can be found to him. Yet, as is shown in this volume, Sturmy's expedition deserves to be recognised and celebrated, for while it did not take him to *Terra Incognita*, it was, in many ways, at least as ambitious as that of Cabot. What made it so was the scale of Sturmy's ambitions, the obstacles he had to overcome to achieve them and the size of the investment needed for his venture.

As Stuart Jenks shows, Sturmy's aims were not dissimilar to those of his more famous successor. Both sought to gain access to the valuable products of Asia by cutting out the middle men and going direct to the source. Cabot wanted to do this by sailing westwards across the Atlantic to reach China and Japan, from which he hoped to bring back the riches of the Orient. For Sturmy, the plan was to initiate an English trade route with the Eastern Mediterranean, which would allow him to both tap the Asian trade and, above all, provide direct access to alum supplies, a valuable mineral that was essential to the English cloth industry. The difference between the two men was that while Cabot was defeated by geography, Sturmy failed because of politics. And it is the nature of their failure that accounts for their differing fame. While Sturmy's failure brought only death and a temporary crisis in relations between England and Genoa, Cabot's failure to reach the East was to be eclipsed by the importance of what he found blocking his path – the continent of North America.

Cabot's accidental discovery of North America means that he is today remembered as an intrepid and successful explorer, rather than as commercial pioneer who hoped to create a monopolised trade route with Asia. Cabot is thus lauded as a great discoverer, while Sturmy is ignored as a failed businessman. Yet, this does not do justice to the scale of Sturmy's ambitions, the size of his venture, or the importance of the venture to the history of England's commercial development. For, as this volume reveals, the 1457/8 expedition should best be remembered, not as a precursor to Cabot's voyage, but as the first serious English attempt to expand the reach of its seaborne trade beyond the narrow bounds of north-west Europe. In a time when most English merchants rarely strayed beyond Calais, the Netherlands and Bordeaux, Sturmy's voyage represented a quantum leap in ambition. For his plan was to break the Italians' monopoly over Mediterranean by going straight to their most lucrative market, that of Asia Minor and the Aegean. To achieve his ambition, as Stuart shows, Sturmy sought and received support not just from Bristol's merchant elite, but from some of the

greatest and most powerful nobles of his time. Such men certainly included Lord Stourton, a former Lord Chamberlain, and it possibly included the Duke of York – the father of the future King of England.

The amount of money invested in Sturmy's expedition is staggering. As Stuart notes, Sturmy received a licence to export £37,000 worth of English goods to the Eastern Mediterranean, which once exchanged for the products of the region would be sold for far more back in England. And while the actual investment in the 1457/8 expedition was much lower, the £6000 compensation for losses awarded in England indicate that this was a huge venture. To put these figures in context, it may be noted that while simple inflation means that this figure could be multiplied by a factor of five-hundred to convert it into 2006 prices (£3 million) such a calculation would fail entirely to express the importance of this voyage relative to the economy of fifteenth century England. There are two reasons for this. First, *per capita* incomes are about ten times higher today than in the fifteenth century – we are all much richer today than in the Middle Ages. Second, the population of England and Wales is about twenty-five times higher today (52 million) than it was in the mid-fifteenth century (c. 2 million). The damage inflicted on the English economy, and particularly on the Bristol economy, would thus be the equivalent to a loss of about £750 million in today's money. Given this, it is hardly surprising that the capture of the expedition by Genoese-backed pirates should have led to the imprisonment of the entire Genoese community in England and the seizure of their assets.

The fact that Sturmy's voyage was 'merely' a commercial one should thus not overshadow the fact that it was probably the most ambitious and expensive commercial venture of its type initiated by *any* group of English merchants in the Middle Ages. If the expedition had been successful, it would not only have made Sturmy and his associates very rich, it would have allowed England to break into one of Europe's most lucrative trades, by latching onto one end of the silk and spice routes that linked the Orient to the West. And even though the endeavour was frustrated, it deserves to be remembered as the first major attempt of English merchants to expand their commercial horizons beyond the shores of Atlantic Europe. As Stuart argues in this volume, Sturmy's ambitions and mode of operation certainly place him squarely within a pattern of commercial exploration and expansion that was characteristic of the sixteenth century and was directly linked to the founding of the great English trading companies. And it was this expansion that was to transform England into the world's greatest commercial and maritime power. Indeed, since Sturmy's voyage is so obviously a precursor to England's maritime enterprise of the Tudor era and since Sturmy himself had no obvious precursors in England, he should be regarded as one of England's first and greatest commercial pioneers. Any analysis of why England was able to transform itself from a relatively small and poor country on the fringes of Europe into the heart of the world's greatest maritime empire should therefore begin with him.

Robert Sturmy is clearly a man fit to be remembered. And with Stuart's new discoveries, found in the archives of the city of Cologne and published in this volume, we now know much more about him and his voyage. It is thus to be hoped that with Stuart's discoveries and his re-evaluation of the significance of the 1457/8 voyage, Sturmy will at last receive just recognition. For he deserves to be remembered as one of this city's greatest sons, a man who embodied the commercial daring of the most entrepreneurial class of fifteenth century England – the merchant venturers of Bristol.

Dr Evan Jones
University of Bristol